

McCall Rosenbluth, Frances (ed.): The Political Economy of Japan's Low Fertility

Skarpelis, Anna

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Skarpelis, A. (2008). McCall Rosenbluth, Frances (ed.): The Political Economy of Japan's Low Fertility. [Review of the book *McCall Rosenbluth, Frances (ed.): The Political Economy of Japan's Low Fertility*, by F. (. T. P. E. o. J. L. F. McCall Rosenbluth]. *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review*, 44(6), 1215-1220. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-65379>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

a cold when America sneezes. The horrifying financial crisis shaking the world-wide banking-and-credit system at the time of writing (October 2008) has been wholly 'made in America'. And so has been, to a great extent, the crisis in which the planetary eco-system has fallen. A quarter of the planetary climate-changing pollution is produced by a country inhabited by only 5% of the world's population. As before, all eyes are fixed on America. Alas, unlike in the case of Tocqueville, Weber and even (occasionally) Adorno, much more so in apprehension than in hope.

Zygmunt Bauman

Notes

¹ The English translation is by Patrick Camiller. The original title in German is *Selbstbetrachtung aus der Ferne: Tocqueville, Weber und Adorno in der Vereinigten Staaten*, Suhrkamp Verlag 2004.

**Frances McCall Rosenbluth (ed.):
*The Political Economy of Japan's Low Fertility***

Stanford, CA, 2007: Stanford University Press, 222 pp.

Fertility as an academic subject passed from demography to a broader field of inquiry a few years ago. This volume thoroughly studies the interaction between women's employment and fertility decisions from a political economy point of view by analysing factors determining labour demand and supply of women and mothers in Japan, a nation at the centre of much European and American research due to its exceptionally low fertility. The contributions, written by an illustrious array of Japanese and American scholars assume that women's welfare is an indirect indicator of fertility levels; consequently, the labour market as the main source of women's financial independence is at the centre of the analysis. Over nine well-structured, concise and

mostly elegant chapters, the links between income, education, skills, employment and fertility are empirically explored through quantitative analyses. The individual chapters address women's economic status and its impact on fertility (Chapter 2), skills as explanation for occupational segregation (Chapter 3), the effects of feminisation of occupational sectors on pay and working conditions (Chapter 4), types of employment available to mothers (Chapter 5), the impact of public policies on mother's labour supply (Chapter 6), changes in distribution of and access to day-care centres (Chapter 7) and lastly the effect of private education of children on their mother's employment (Chapter 8). The main thesis of the book is that fertility is an indirect indicator of women's well-being, and that low fertility levels in advanced democracies may in part be accounted for by vested interests impeding women's access to employment, rather than by women's choices (4).

Concise and jargon-free, each chapter addresses a different aspect of women's employment in relation to motherhood, yet the linkages to the overall hypothesis are not always evident. Apart from Margarita Estevez-Abe's contribution (Chapter 3), the chapters rely to a large extent on a theory-light analysis of different quantitative datasets. The chapters are well structured and written, however some of the conclusions catch the reader unawares. Furthermore, while most concepts are defined well, one of the most important ones – fertility – regrettably is not. Frances McCall Rosenbluth in the introduction makes the distinction between women who delay childbirth, those who reduce the number of children they have over their life course and those who go without having children altogether. Unfortunately, this analytic distinction is not taken up in the subsequent chapters' research design. Also, women's welfare is not explained beyond arguing that it is related to women's economic independence, leading to an almost inter-

changeable usage of welfare and employment throughout the volume. Framing the debate in terms of welfare might be desirable in terms of shifting responsibility from women's 'unwilling wombs' to society at large and thereby legitimising macro-level interventions. But there is much more to women's welfare than economic independence, even though it doubtlessly plays a role. In the following paragraphs, rather than pursuing the chapter structure by providing summaries of each chapter, the main issues raised – education, skills, employment and income, and the impact of these variables on fertility – will be described and critically evaluated.

Akin to many Western countries, in Japan women's education is linked to lower fertility levels. Rather counter-intuitively, women's education in Japan also seems inversely related to their labour force participation after childbirth (educational homogamy among marriage partners was unfortunately not included in the analysis). Following Becker's human capital theory and to a lesser extent Estevez-Abe's argument of skill specificity, one would assume that women who have invested in education would return to paid work after childbirth, as the opportunity costs of staying at home are higher relative to those of their less educated counterparts. However, Keiko Hirao (Chapter 8) finds evidence to the contrary, namely that educated women tend to stay at home after childbirth, modifying the well-known Japanese *m-shaped* labour force participation curve of women. In the *m-shaped* model, female (full time) labour force participation raises continuously after graduation, then drops steeply upon birth of the first child, thereby constituting the first arch of the 'm', to pick up to a lesser extent a few years after childbirth with increasing numbers of women engaging in (mostly part time) employment. The second arch is completed when women exit the labour market to retire. Hirao shows that labour force participation for educat-

ed mothers (those with four years of college or more) follows a different pattern, which is coined 'giraffe shaped' (p. 188). Instead of returning at lower rates into employment, educated mothers tend to stay at home and forego any kind of paid employment, which means no second arch and consequently a participation curve for educated women resembling the neck and back of a giraffe. This evidence is supported by Sawako Shirahase's finding that mothers' human capital is not a significant determinant to mothers' work (p. 51).

Alas, causal explanations for this phenomenon are not offered, apart from the suggestion that somehow more value is placed on a mother's time at home. The introduction clarified the contributors' opposition to cultural approaches, but despite the fact that this is thoroughly justifiable in the field of Japanese country studies, where a lack of understanding is often glossed over with the benign veil of *l'exception japonaise*, looking at culture to understand differences in what the role of a housewife entails is invaluable. Including a reference to the professionalisation of the Japanese housewife since the beginning of the 20th century could help explain the cultural oddity of highly educated women dropping out of the labour market for the better part of the period that their children in the education system. The professionalisation of the housewife resulted in an added emphasis on the mother's roles in childcare psychology and nursing (for a detailed overview see Sand [2003]), at a time when household duties such as cooking and cleaning were in part 'outsourced' to maids. But childcare always remained the mother's responsibility. Conceivably – and ignoring issues of gender equality – it may only be educated mothers in wealthy households today who can afford adhering to cultural traditions about childrearing, when less wealthy women have to return to employment in order to make ends meet.

The volume's main theoretical thrust comes from Estevez-Abe's contribution in Chapter Three on gender bias in skills and social policies. Estevez-Abe's argument consists of two parts, one targeting gendered skill choices, and the other assessing the effects of labour protection on the working conditions of women. The skills argument states that women opt for general skills (defined as portable skills acquired off the job) rather than specific skills, because these skills are less likely to atrophy during the period taken out for childrearing, thereby reducing the opportunity cost of such career interruptions. The labour protection policies argument states that these policies reinforce the difference between labour market insiders and outsiders in jobs with firm-specific skills. They punish those who are located at the 'periphery', as different forms of non-regular employment are used to provide functional and numerical flexibility within a company. This results in uncertainty for those in the fringes, mainly women, but also in the maintenance of the core's prerogatives of stable employment and high wages. Other literature however is not at all clear on the beneficial re-entry wage effect of 'general skills' jobs as opposed to 'specific skills' jobs; in fact, most studies analysing the 'mummy penalty' find that wage or promotion penalties exist for returning mothers in almost all jobs, regardless of skills profile. Evidence from the present volume does not support Estevez-Abe's postulates either. Mary C. Brinton (Chapter 4) takes the case of the clerical sector to demonstrate that mobility for women and mothers is very low despite the general skills character of clerical work. She further shows that re-entry after childbirth is difficult if not impossible, particularly for full-time jobs (pp. 102, 122), thereby negating the assumed positive relationship of general skills employment and ease of re-entry. Wage and other working condition penalties for career

interruptions thus do not seem easily assignable to the skill profile of the job. Also, most of the labour force in Japan, regardless of gender, is classified as 'generalist' before entering the workforce. Therefore, one cannot speak of 'education choices' among college-educated women (p. 208) because 'skill selection' only takes place after and not before entry into the labour force. Furthermore, with women delaying childbirth and men's progressively shorter tenure, could this not point to a convergence of tenure, rendering firms' discrimination against women on the basis of anticipated but no longer realistic significantly shorter tenure outdated?

Evidence on the effect of women's employment status on fertility seems mixed. Women's employment status – that is to say, whether they are employed, and if so, in what form of employment – is analysed both for childless women and for mothers. Eiko Kenjoh (Chapter 5) and Patricia Boling (Chapter 6) argue that the childlessness of many women is a structural problem, in so far as the workplace discriminates against mothers. They argue that women in many cases make it a deliberate choice to forsake children, because the trade-offs are too stark once the child is born and former employment has been given up (p. 148). In addition to re-entry difficulties, Shirahase (p. 53) and Brinton (p. 100) point out that there exist few opportunities for women to move up the career ladder, particularly in white-collar employment. As for the employment structure of married women, those who worked full time before being wed are more likely to go on working even after childbirth. Surprisingly, women in dual-earner couples are more likely to have children over their life course than are one-and-a-half or single earner households. This speaks against the claim made in other chapters that the opportunity costs of childbirth are so high for working women that they choose their career over children. As for the impact of childbirth

on women's employment, Kenjoh explains that most women re-entering the labour market in the first five years after childbirth do so as part-timers, as this employment form is taken to be more compatible with childrearing. The part-time choice is partly attributed to compatibility issues between employment and childrearing resulting from the limited availability of childcare for very young children (p. 124), which is particularly scarce in urban areas (Junichiro Wada, Chapter 7). Still, a page earlier, the argument is made that mothers are reluctant to re-enter the labour market in part-time positions, because these offer worse working conditions than would be available to them in full-time employment. Perhaps future research could address the issues of working conditions preferences, household situation (both in terms of income *and* education) and the actual employment choices of mothers.

Income is a recalcitrant subject in a study this geared towards an analysis of individual women rather than of households. Shirahase's chapter does an admirable job of disentangling different types of income and attempts to resolve conflicting evidence regarding the effect of women's income on fertility. It is found that there is a link between higher income among women, or more precisely their higher relative contribution to household income, and lower fertility. This leads Shirahase to assume the incompatibility of career success and family (p. 52). Inversely, the higher a man's income is, the greater the likelihood of his wife not taking up employment and the higher fertility. It is suggested in the conclusion (p. 210) that a broader intra-gender wage distribution will lead to wealthier women being able to afford to outsource childcare by paying other women to perform this task. Yet, the argument made in a previous chapter (p. 188) is that highly educated women who live in wealthy households, i.e. those women who could afford to pay professionals for

childcare services to start with, are opting to stay at home to take care of their children's education (again, little is said about the number of children in wealthy compared to non-wealthy households). Thus, as mentioned above, the negative fertility-employment linkage seems to be less a question of financial affordability than one of cultural mores.

In sum, like in many edited volumes, the chapters in *The Political Economy of Japan's Low Fertility* do not all fit together perfectly. Likewise, as has been pointed out in the previous paragraphs the overall coherence is plagued by a few inconsistencies between chapters. What is particularly worrying is the failure to resolve – or even to address – in the conclusion the contradictions between empirical findings in the individual chapters and the only strong theoretical argument in the book, made by Estevez-Abe. Some questions that should be addressed in further research include: Do educated mothers stay at home because they can afford to, because they prefer to or because there exists no suitable employment in a discriminatory workplace environment? What is the link between women's education and income? Why are poor women assumed to be able to take time off for childbirth, while middle-income women are assumed to not be able to afford to? How are the three different aspects of fertility distributed according to different groups of women? What is the role of the husband in fertility decisions? If fertility is linked to welfare, does an ideal level of fertility exist? Probably the biggest problem with this volume is its lack of an explicit linkage between the main hypothesis – women's welfare and its impact on fertility – and the hypotheses generated in the individual chapters. While the overall narrative is consistent and the organisation of the book leaves little to be desired in terms of logical progression, the conclusions of individual chapters at times seem contrived under the effort to support the uni-

fied policy recommendation of increasing the availability of part-time employment for women. Frictions between preliminary results in individual chapters are not resolved in the concluding chapter. Nevertheless, these criticisms testify to the exceptional fluidity of the overall narrative, and that may make readers more forgiving of the glitches between chapters.

In some respects the volume is like a David Lynch film: one can read it several times and each time find a different interpretation. In terms of making the reader question long-held beliefs this is certainly a strength; in terms of providing advice to policymakers who will only read the volume selectively it may be a weakness. This author's first reading of the book resulted in a pessimistic appraisal of the challenges to Japan. If government policies are ineffective at raising fertility (a bold claim, both in terms of general evidence [e.g. Castles 2003] and given the difficulties involved in assessing policy impact on fertility [e.g. Neyer and Andersson 2007]). If the locus of effective change is the firm, what chances of encouraging change in fertility behaviour remain? The deregulation of labour markets could lead to an increase in overall women's employment, but the additional economic insecurity that this would bring both sexes might undermine this effect. If solely intra-gender wage inequality can compensate for the lack of public policy provisions for working mothers (pp. 83, 210), how is that promoting gender equality? We are still in the process of understanding the impact of economic uncertainty on social stability, and marriage and fertility are certainly among the relevant indicators. But this issue is sorely absent from the analysis at hand. Even in Japan, few people would oppose reducing workplace discrimination against women (evidenced by the plethora of glossy government brochures). Yet it is unclear why this book's contributors insist so fervently on the ineffectiveness of government policies

for increasing fertility. And this despite the lack of counterfactual evidence in the case of Japan combined with the evidence for an apparent lack of childcare provision, particularly for the under three year olds (e.g. p. 124, but also p. 136 and p. 160 ff.), leading other researchers to stress the importance of the availability of public infrastructure as well as the role of institutional frameworks in promoting fertility.

A second reading left me temporarily more optimistic with regards to potential changes in fertility. Notwithstanding the contributors' rejection of culturalist approaches, they seem to suggest that culture change – more women yearning for economic independence, shifting roles in the household division of labour along with the decline of the ubiquitous 'salary-man' single breadwinner model – could perhaps lead to changes in fertility. Still, if the economic uncertainty and social stability linkage is taken into account, then a softening of the core-periphery division in labour markets could lead to more workers feeling insecure and not improve fertility rates after all. Despite the criticisms presented in this review, the present volume is certainly worth reading. The descriptive evidence points to some interesting co-occurrences, such as the detrimental effect of having a child under the age of three or a wealthy husband have on a mother's employment. As with most other single country case studies, there is little room to generalise the mechanisms at work described therein. Still, this is an accessible volume to both researchers and non-academics alike that will hopefully push future research into asking bold questions instead of merely providing an overview of descriptive data. The bold hypotheses and small contradictions between chapters provoke the reader to disentangle and probe the hypotheses in confrontation to each other. Any volume that would have foregone strong hypotheses for the sake of a smoother argument

would not have been as thought-provoking and interesting. Never mind the inconsistencies.

Anna Skarpelis
Max Planck Institute for the Study
of Societies, Cologne
skarpelis@mpifg.de

References

- Castles, Francis G. 2003. 'The World Turned Upside Down: Below Replacement Fertility, Changing Preferences and Family-friendly Public Policy in 21 OECD Countries.' *Journal of European Public Policy* 13 (3): 209–227.
- Neyer, Gerda and Gunnar Andersson. 2007. 'Consequences of Family Policies on Childrearing Behavior: Effects or Artifacts?' MPIDR Working Paper, WP 2007 – 021.
- Sand, Jordan. 2003. *House and Home in Modern Japan: Architecture, Domestic Space and Bourgeois Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

István György Tóth (ed.): *Tárki European Social Report*

Budapest 2008: Tárki, pp. 132.

The Tárki European Social Report is compiled by Tárki, a Budapest-based research institute. Its special focus is the comparison of the EU 15 and the EU's New Member States (NMS), which joined in 2004, and in particular the situation of Hungary. In practice this means that sometimes specific Hungarian information is highlighted alongside European data. The report is 'Social' in the sense that it provides concise evidence about the social – e.g. the demographic, labour-market, income and housing – situation of households. It is 'European' in that it is based on a comparative dataset for 24 European Union member states – the Community Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – and the weighted dataset comprises almost 190 million Euro-

pean households. This novel survey therefore allows for comparisons across the EU, including a comparison of the 'old' EU 15 and the NMS. The survey provides evidence on a particular point in time, so it is supplemented with alternative data sources when the report explores changes over time.

Chapter 1, on demographic processes, describes three determinants of the demographic profile of Europe: fertility, mortality and migration. This is followed by a brief outline of alternative options for social policy. Finally, the impact of macro-processes on households is explored based on individual and household data. The chapter presents evidence on total fertility rates by continents, by regions in Europe between 1950 and 2050, and also on the average age of first childbirth by country. This section seeks to answer the question of how to promote childbearing through public policy and in particular whether the role of financial support is significant. The chapter also tells us about the gap that exists between 'old' and 'new' Europe in terms of life expectancy and that future projections predict a slight convergence by 2050. As for migration, the authors note that the 'data on migration phenomena are unreliable' and they present existing estimates of the migration stock and flows. The socio-economic consequences of these processes are discussed briefly but with wide coverage of potential issues, including population ageing, migration policies, productivity and economic growth, labour market policies, and welfare spending. This macro-level perspective is complemented with a snapshot of the demographic features of households in Europe based on a data analysis by the authors.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of labour market processes. Employment, activity and (short- and long-term) unemployment trends are presented from the perspective of the Lisbon strategy over the years between 1995 and 2006. In addition